

# Crazy Train?

***By Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University***

**Dr Steven McCabe is hosting our ‘HS2 – On The Right Track?’ panel at this year’s online Centre for Brexit Studies Annual Conference ‘Global Birmingham – Beyond Brexit’, taking place on Wednesday 23 September 2020. He will be joined by Vicky Pryce, Rachel Eade MBE, Liam Byrne MP and Dr Leslie Budd. Find out more and register for FREE tickets [here](#).**

HS2 will be debated at the Annual Centre for Brexit Conference next week and which I’m chairing. It’s the reason for the title of this blog which was a 1980 single for Birmingham’s Ozzy Osbourne and concerned the perceived threat of nuclear war with the USSR contemplated as realistic threat at the time.

For critics of HS2, Osbourne’s single might seem to neatly summarise the building this high-speed train link, completed in two phases over the next fifteen to twenty years, allowing trains to reach speeds of up to 250mph. As the diagram below shows, phase one connects London and West Midlands (Birmingham) followed by phase two providing connections between the West Midlands and Manchester/Leeds.



HS2 was originally announced in 2009 by the then Labour government and regarded as a logical way to continue the development of high-speed rail links following construction of the 67-mile connection, completed in 2003, between London (St Pancras) and Channel Tunnel. Economic analysis of the economic uplift that this route gave to towns such as Ebbsfleet and Ashford, as had occurred in Europe, indicated benefit would accrue elsewhere.

Prior to HS1, the rail network ran with trains that were, at best, limited to 125 miles per hour and this was only possible on the parts of the track that were straight for at least a couple of miles. By the announcement of HS2 many European countries, especially France and Spain, had extensive coverage by trains capable of travelling at over 270 km/h (170 mph).

In 2009 was estimated that in Europe there was at least 3,500 miles of track capable of carrying high-speed trains and, significantly, 2,160 miles being constructed with another 5,280 miles planned.

As anyone who had been in Europe will attest, travelling long distances between major cities or, for example, getting from Paris to the Mediterranean, is a very rapid and comfortable journey by high-speed train. Given the way rail travel is funded in the vast majority of European countries, such travel is also pretty cheap when compared to the UK.

Why would one travel by car which, because of motorway tolls that are common, was more expensive?

The UK, in which, on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1804, a steam-powered engine pulled carriages along a tramway of the Penydarren ironworks, near Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales, and which subsequently experienced 'railway mania', over two hundred years later, was seen to seriously lag behind Europe in terms of high-speed trains.

It is significant that the history of trains shows that they bring economic benefit to communities they serve. If you have never read any of books written by Christian Wolmar, you are missing a real treat. Like anyone passionate about their subject, he brings a wealth of knowledge and fascinatingly detail about how the advent of trains transformed the fortunes of towns and cities they connected during the Industrial Revolution.

Wolmar's *Fire and Steam: A New History of the Railways in Britain*, originally published in 2007 by Atlantic Books, is well worth consulting.

As someone who can vaguely remember the end of steam trains and going on holiday on them in the mid-1960s, I can attest the power of trains to liberate. As Wolmar explains in *Fire and Steam*, railways completely altered the lives of the population of a country that lived, prior to the early nineteenth century, largely outside of the major towns and cities.

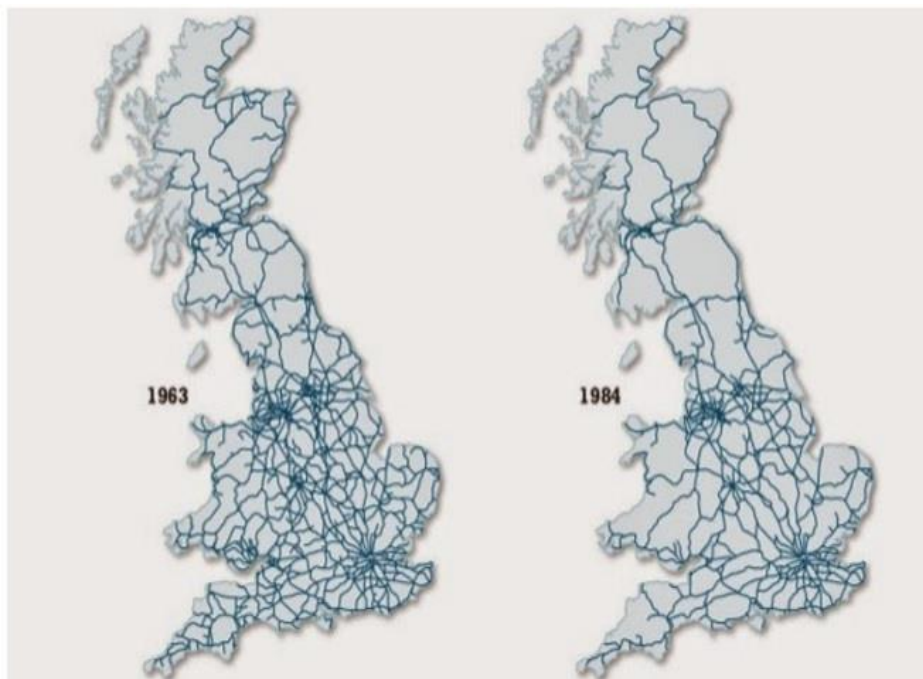
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Life for citizens who depended on agriculture was limited in distances travelled and revolved around the seasons. Curiously, many of the things we take for granted today, such as the academic year beginning in September, is based on the assumption that children would be involved in bringing crops in at the end of the summer.

Wolmar includes the fact that before trains, those living away from the coast had never previously eaten fish caught in the sea as it wasn't possible to transport them quickly enough to avoid them going bad. When next queueing for fish and chips give a thought to the invention of the steam locomotive! Another historical gem in Wolmar's book is that the genesis of the football league was made possible for both teams and their supporters to travel around the country on matchdays.

Prior to extensive cuts made to the rail network by infamous Dr Beeching in his two reports, *The Reshaping of British Railways* (1963) and *The Development of the Major Railway Trunk Routes* (1965), getting around Great Britain by train was made relatively easy.

The diagram below shows how much the rail network was reduced due to recommendations contained in Beeching's reports.



Rail network before and after 'Beeching cuts'

'Railway Mania' resulted a frenzy of activity in term of constructing rail lines. With relatively few restrictions, any individual or group possessing, or with access to, sufficient funding, could build a line considered likely to be profitable. Though some lines were refused permission, this was unusual. Normally the reason was protestations from influential landowners not wanting commoners travelling across

their land. This is the reason that some lines take unusually wide arcs making them unsuitable for high-speed trains.

In ninety years, Great Britain went from having no railways to a peak of 23,440 miles immediately before the First World War. However, as many operators were to discover, though building a line required tremendous effort by the engineers and the labour employed on the lines, 'navvies' (a shortening of 'inland navigators' from the canal-building days – Terry Coleman's *The Railway Navvies* being a tour de force – making any profit was often a greater challenge.

Many lines never made a penny and required government subsidies for operators to provide trains to serve communities. Some closed and fell into disrepair.

Lack of investment and the emerging threat of the motorcar, as well as extensive roadbuilding after the Second World War, created challenges for railways and myriad of operators. Almost 1,300 miles of rail track was closed between 1923 and 1939 when the network became vital to the war effort.

Nationalisation in 1948 was an attempt to create control in a system that had emerged organically (and chaotically).

Whilst the mileage travelled by road was increasing at an annual rate of 10% between 1948 and 1964, railway use was declining. As those in charge of the nationalised railways knew from the data, the costs of keeping the existing system going far outweighed revenues from passengers who still used trains and the fast diminishing number of organisations using the network to move goods.

Though what was then the vast sum of £1,240 million was dedicated to railways through the 1955 Modernisation Plan to replace steam locomotives with modern diesel and electric alternatives, in the belief that this would enable British Rail to be profitable by 1962, the losses continued to mount up. By the early 1960s British Rail was losing over £100 million a year (£2.25 billion in current terms).

The view that radical rationalisation was the only option formed in government.

Dr Beeching was approached as the person to wield the hatchet. Though over 3,000 miles of track had closed since 1948, Beeching in his first report in 1963 recommended that 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of line be shut down. This represented closure of, respectively, 55% of stations and 30% of track.

Such was the basis of a system that worked despite, and not because of, what governments did. This was largely due goodwill by remaining customers and dedication from staff who, it frequently seemed, remained passionately committed to working on the railways. Nonetheless, the system creaked and, sadly, it was only a matter of time before disasters, crashes, occurred requiring urgent intervention.

The use of hugely expensive franchises to encourage competition – always a spurious notion in railways – followed by further crises and renationalisation has been the pattern over the last 20 years.

The current railway network has largely been modernised but, on some routes, is overloaded at peak time. There is a byzantine system of booking trains that, quite literally it seems, nobody really understands and in which fares are consistently inconsistent.

HS2 would represent the largest increase in this country's rail network for over a century. However, and as anyone who has given even the most cursory of attention in the last decade is aware, it is hugely controversial. Perhaps the greatest issue of controversy is cost.

In 2010 it was estimated that HS2 would cost between £30.9 billion and £36 billion.

The latest figure produced by the government is that the total costs of the two phases will be £106 billion.

A number of commentators doubt whether even this figure will be adequate for the proposed two phases.

As such HS2 may turn out to be the same as the 31.4 mile Channel Tunnel.

Though considered one of the "Seven Wonders of the Modern World" by the American Society of Civil Engineers, this tunnel, which took six

years to complete between 1988 and 1994, cost 80% more to build (£4.65 billion, over £12 billion today), than originally estimated.

In the curious world of, increasingly vast, sums of money being spent by the government, £12 billion looks like good value. HS2 would be, if completed for £106 billion, not greatly different to the estimated cost of the 'moonshot' testing announced by PM Johnson last week.

However, many still question whether high-speed train travel is an extremely expensive way to get people between the major cities it will serve.

Surely, critics of HS2 assert, if the objective is to create the improved infrastructure so urgently needed outside of London, would the money not be better spent on more traditional methods of transporting people such as existing train routes and trams?

Perhaps, it's also argued, Covid-19 demonstrates a future for this country likely to be far less London-centric. Building high-speed train links between the capital and cities in the north may be unnecessary?

Equally, it is claimed, the economics upon which the HS2 was originally conceived are much less persuasive now, potentially marginal and possibly even negative.

HS2 may not be the elixir that it was claimed to be at the outset by advocates and may prove to be as unprofitable as some of the ill-conceived routes that were built during 'railway mania'.

At present, though, and contrary to what his chief political advisor argues, HS2 is supported by the current incumbent in 10 Downing Street.

However, should there be a change in PM – a rumour growing in currency – who knows what the replacement's view on HS2 will be?

Should Chancellor Rishi Sunak, touted as Johnson's replacement, and fully aware of the need to save money to deal with the debt caused by coronavirus, he might believe HS2 to be one 'crazy train' we can easily live without.



***The Centre for Brexit Studies Annual Conference ‘Global Birmingham – Beyond Brexit’ is bringing together industry experts and big names from across the West Midlands and wider UK. Keynote speakers include Sir Vince Cable, Former Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King’s College London and Director of UK in a Changing Europe and Fiona Allan, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Birmingham Hippodrome. Other panel discussions alongside our HS2 debate, include Commonwealth Games, Manufacturing and Future of the West Midlands. [Find out more and register for FREE tickets here!](#)***

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807), contributor to *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644), *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824), *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Paul Hindley and Paul Hishman (published by Social Liberal Forum), *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by John Mair (forthcoming to be published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power*, jointly edited with Beverley Nielsen (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099).